

TV Commercials: A Boon or Bane?

A Viewer-friendly Ad-management Analysis

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An ever-increasing number of commercials on the television set of a common man raises a number of questions as to what should be the viewer-friendly ad-management policy. As the current number of commercials during the prime time and non-prime time has reached a threatening magnitude, the common man has begun zipping and zapping which frustrates the very concept of ad-planning policy developed so carefully in the last one decade. The article discusses the various consequences of such indiscriminate advertising glossing over the viewers' interests and explores the possibilities of arriving at viewer-friendly ad-management policy to keep the media economy steadily progressive in the next decade.

When television was introduced 25 years ago, the viewers were overwhelmed with the joy of entertainment that the new invention promised. Indeed, it was an hour of pride and rejoice for everyone who had bought a television. The viewers were cursing themselves for their bad luck that they couldn't access all the channels available in the world at that time. Little did they realize that they would equally curse themselves later, as is happening today, for having owned a television set (may be "Owner's Pride and Neighbor's Envy") which has access to 100 to 150 channels with unending number of commercials that turn their precious time of joy into misery. Nor did they know that they were to squeeze out a lot of their hard-earned money to watch these commercials in a great measure even if they were to decide to see only some channels through cable network. For that matter, no one was even aware whether every cable operator would be able to offer all the channels or the channels of one's choice.

Assuming that everyone is getting the choicest channels one asked for or wanted for, yet a TV owner is today scared to state—"whether having a TV is indeed an owner's pride or neighbor's envy?" Sarcastically, it is certainly a neighbor's joy as not only those, no one around are able to enjoy the TV in view of the vexing number of commercials cutting into their limited time.

Mark Tully,¹ an eminent Journalist (a BBC Correspondent for BBC Radio C-4 and formerly Chief of News Bureau) in his latest book, *India's Unending Journey*, writes—"There are even more advertisements on Indian television than there are on the British independent channels. Taking advantage of India's cricket mania, advertisers have invented the five-ball over, with the advertisements being shown before the sixth ball has been bowled. I don't know why Indians don't rise in revolt against

¹ Mark Tully, a born Indian and a British Citizen, is an eminent journalist (a BBC Correspondent for BBC Radio C-4 and formerly Chief of News Bureau, India) and Writer.

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The Indian television networks that slavishly imitate the style of western TV help to promote the consumerism that goes with globalization

the crass commercials that interrupt their national game—I know that it drives me mad to see the batting genius Sachin Tendulkar holding his bat one moment and clutching a fizzy drink bottle the next!”.

Why? If one takes a scientific look at the way TV channels are currently functioning and reeling out the messages, it is not difficult to understand the reason for such disgust as Mark Tully put forth.

One analysis that Mark Tully puts forth is that, “Media proprietors aren’t likely to act as effective watchdogs, warning about the dangers as well as the advantages of globalization, because advertising is their main source of revenue and advertisers want to promote global brands. But they do protest when international media groups claim that globalization means they should be allowed to enter the Indian market.

So television networks that slavishly imitate the style of western TV help to promote the consumerism that goes with globalization.

Relentless advertising pushes goods and services, the majority of which are out of reach for the poor. The bank, advertisements urge viewers to borrow money and offer credit to buy goods, though only those considered creditworthy need apply. The branded clothes culture has also swept through the middle-classes, with fashion houses from even the very top of the range, such as Louis Vuitton,² opening shops in the big cities”.

In fact, while dealing with “Developing and Managing an Advertising Program” in their famous book *Marketing Management* by Philip Kotler³ and Kevin Lane Keller noted that, “In recent years, researches have noticed reduced effectiveness due to increased commercial clutter (advertisers beaming shorter and more numerous commercials at the audience), increased ‘zipping and zapping’ of commercials (aided by the arrival of new TV systems such as TiVo and Replay TV) and lower viewing owing to the growth in cable and satellite TV and DVD/VCRs” (Philip Kotler and Kevin Lane Keller, 533-534:2006).³

In the theory of ‘Integrated Marketing Communications’, the marketing management has evolved a very good model of media strategies which deal with not only selecting the appropriate media from among the Media Type, Media Class and Media Time for delivering the desired number of Exposures (E) but also a mathematical formula to measure the impact of such exposure of messages. Reach (R) is the number of different persons or households that are exposed to a particular media schedule at least once during a specified program. Frequency (F) is the number of times within the specified time period that an average person or household is exposed to the message. Impact (I) is the qualitative value of an exposure through a given medium. Thus, the total number of E is measured as sum of $E = R \times F$. These exposures are categorized into four varieties namely: Continuity, Concentration, Fighting and Pulsing based on the budget and sales promotion targets ‘Ad-Planning’. This analysis

² The Louis Vuitton Company (more commonly known simply as Louis Vuitton) is a luxury French fashion and leather goods brand and company, headquartered in Paris, France.

³ Philip Kotler is the S.C. Johnson & Son Distinguished Professor of International Marketing at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. Kevin Lane Keller is the E. B. Osborn Professor of Marketing at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College.

sounds fine from the corporate point of view but the research from the viewers of these commercial exposures has something else to convey.

Whereas introduction of a brand or a product, familiarization of a product and sustainability of the product engage the integrated marketing communications towards evolving more and more fresh images and messages of the advertisements to keep the advertising more customized and viewer-friendly, both geographically and culturally, the advertisement revenues of the individual (Raj channel) as well as combined TV channels (Eg., all DD Channels, Star channels, all Zee channels, all Eenadu channels, all Sun channels, etc.,) have touched a whopping \$100 bn in India on an annual basis (<http://us.rediff.com/money/2005/oct/20tv1.htm>).⁴

Though this is an amazing performance of media economy, certainly increasing number of commercials on TV programs is not going to last due to the lack of viewer-friendly approach. It should not be forgotten that the viewer's sole aim of having a TV is not to watch a non-stop 24x7 ad-campaign of the national and multinational corporates. The viewer needs a modicum of entertainment from the other programs. At times, the viewer feels that his/her leisure time was eaten away by the commercials mainly. This might lead to the total frustration of the high objectives of ad-planning formulated with heavy budgetary inputs.

Alternatively, Apple TV (charts) newly being introduced is likely to bring a 'Death of the 30-second TV Commercial'. And it's going to get easier to avoid commercials with Apple TV, said Tim Wilson, a General Partner with Partech International, a venture capital firm that is planning to invest more heavily in online video and other forms of new media. Advertisements during TV shows, long considered a nuisance by many consumers, are no longer required viewing. "The role of advertising is shifting. It's about giving consumers control of what they want. Apple TV and other devices are clearly doing that," said Mike DiFranza, the CEO of Captivate Network, a company owned by newspaper publisher Gannett that runs ads on digital screens placed in elevators in office buildings (http://money.cnn.com/2007/03/13/news/companies/tv_commercials/index.htm).

Against this backdrop, it is ideal to examine how Indian media industry has aped the media strategies of the west to garner the highest revenues by formatting the media transmission patterns akin to that of western channels. The list of TV channels is shown in Table I along with an analysis of the Indian channels (Box).

The purpose of this study is thus to examine the working of Indian TV channels vis-à-vis commercials within the transmission patterns imported from the west and to suggest alternative strategies to reduce the growing number of commercials on TV programs. This is essential in order to keep the viewer-friendly ad-management programs live before it boomeranged or recoiled on the very objectives of the ad-management programs of the corporates.

Analysis of TV Clock

When it comes to analysis of television clock, two categories of patterns (genre) emerge: 1. Entertainment Channel Pattern; 2. News Channel Pattern—though both are commercial channels undoubtedly.

1. Entertainment Channel Pattern

Given any entertainment channel, one can clearly see a 'pattern' establishing on the transmission front. The following 'pattern' would ideally reflect the clock of a commercial channel.

⁴ TV channels' latest mantra: Reports the strategies being worked out to garner the above revenue.

- i. Morning religious talks/songs/prayers (Sun Network Channels, ETV, MAA TV, DD, Zee);
- ii. Morning birthday greetings followed by Songs (Sun Network Channels, ETV, MAA TV, Zee, SAHARA);
- iii. Repeat of serials currently telecast previous night (ETV, SAHARA, Zee, DD);
- iv. Every half an hour breaks for signature songs of the channel;
- v. Repeat telecast of old serials (ETV, SAHARA, DD);
- vi. Film Roundup (on a special day in a week);
- vii. City highlights (on a special day in a week);
- viii. Youth participating programs (on a special day in a week);
- ix. Regular serials (concurrent) some serials even running into multiples of hundreds episodes;
- x. Films and songs (ETV, Zee, Sony, MAA, Sun Network Channels).

Corporate sectors sponsor almost all these telecasts and therefore, numerous commercial advertisements pour in during the transmission between these serials and during the telecast of the serials.

2. News Channel Pattern

Given any news channel the following pattern establishes on the transmission front.

- i. Regular news telecasts (hourly, half-hourly and prime time);
- ii. Repeat telecasts;
- iii. Discussions (Aaj Tak, NDTV, ETV 2, TV 9);
- iv. Interviews (Aaj Tak, NDTV, ETV 2, TV 9);
- v. Episodic stories: a. Investigative (Aaj Tak, NDTV, etc.); b. Human Interest (MAA TV, Sun Network, ETV); c. Stories of achievement and inspiration (ETV 2); d. Crime Stories—reconstructed (ETV, TV 9).

Like in the commercial channels, the corporate sectors sponsor almost all these telecasts and therefore numerous commercial advertisements pour in during the transmission between these telecasts and during the telecast of the News or Discussions, interviews or episodic stories.

Clash with Human Clock and the 'Myth of Prime Time'

1. Entertainment Channels

Initially, the term 'prime time'⁵ came into existence when the Doordarshan (DD) began its first ever commercial transmission, a step forward from its earlier transmission of cow rearing, pig rearing, poultry, agriculture (*Krishi Darshan*), folk songs and dramas, etc. (Vanita Kohli,⁶ 2003: 59). The DD telecasted historic serials of Ramanand Sagar, BR Chopra (*Ramayan*, *Mahabharat*, *Chandrakanta*, *Chanakya* and *Chandragupt*, *Sahasra Phan*, etc.) on Sundays in the time slot of 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. or 10 a.m. to 11 a.m.

⁵ Though there is no any documented definition of 'prime time', notionally it can be defined as the time when all the members of the family have an opportunity to collectively view the television programs (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prime_time). It varies continent to continent and is assumed to be between 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. in some countries.

⁶ Vanita Kohli is the Media Editor at *Businessworld*, India's largest selling business weekly and author of *Indian Media Business*.

as these hours in those days were considered to be 'family time' when all members of a family has the opportunity to collectively view them. Based on the market surveys done that time, the concept of 'prime time' emerged. But this was a matter over 25 years ago.

In the context of modern work culture, wherein 24x7 work-systems got into place (quite distinct from industrialized environment of Public or Private Sector Undertakings) in a big way, and nightshifts in Business Process Outsourcings (BPOs) and info-technologies have become the working pattern of the day, the earlier concept of 'prime time' may not be true in case of the urban elite any longer. (According to a survey, Media Penetration 2003: Terrestrial TV covers All India 53% and Urban 80%; Cable and Satellite All India 20% and Urban 46%: PTI Source). On the rural front also, the limited power supply, which is offered in two different spells, deprived the farmers and their families the luxury of watching the cable television channels at the 'prime time'.

Against this backdrop, one can easily assume whether the 'prime time' remained same for the rural agricultural force including small peasants and the labor as in the past. Likewise, women empowerment into various cellular and mobile technology sectors and financial sectors on the urban front totally changed the day's routine of Sundays or holidays. Against these changing lifestyles and cultural patterns, the definition of 'prime time' tends to be more hazy and even shifting from area to area within the state and this 'shift' is also getting quite accentuated from channel to channel.

Due to heavy competitive approach towards sponsored serials/films and ad-planning, there is no unanimity between any two entertainment channels/news channels regarding the exact time what could be described as 'prime time', be it 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. or 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. in the evenings or 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. or 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. in the mornings. In the absence of any authentic information as to how current commercials or news channels are arriving at the definition of their 'prime time', some commercial channels even claim that their mega serials or super-hit serials are also potential enough to shift the 'prime time' an hour before or after the usually accepted family-viewers' time as the 'prime time'. The precision in the definition based on the data (of market survey) is no longer relevant for many commercial/news channels.

Against this backdrop, the time available for the viewers, engaged in constant struggle in eking out their livelihoods and in meeting their life commitments, for entertainment is limited and has to fit into the framework of the TV channels, the "patterns and their changing 'prime times'" which are described in the foregoing. More often than not these time slots and viewers' convenience do not synchronize. Odds are that they clash more than agree with. In the ultimate analysis, whatever little time a viewer or viewers' families are left with, it should offer the entertainment and thus serve the purpose for which the TV was bought.

2. News Channels

As in the case of 'Entertainment Channels', even News Channels believe that a 'prime time' lies around 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. in Indian households. These bulletins therefore appear covering all the

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important events of the day for the day. Usually, the bulletins run for 30 minutes including weather forecasts. Rest of the news casts that run entire all day long, before and after these 'prime time' slots are so boring that they waste the time of the viewers sensationalizing very trivial matters, personal matters of celebrities and matters of law and order or petty crimes. And all this is done with an overdose of commercials, which is one of a constant irritation to the viewers of these channels. But news channels have a different story to justify this based on Television Rating Points (TRP).

People can hardly forget the kind of media hype given for Pramod Mahajan's health preceding his death in the hospital and, afterwards for Rahul Mahajan for all his *dos and don'ts*. Issues of Mika Singh kissing Rakhi Savant, models getting topless in a fashion show, etc. virtually become sensational news and footage covering such issues runs hours together. Sometimes, News Channels tend to cover something trash that wouldn't of any consequence to an ordinary viewer in any manner.

All this notwithstanding, the galore of commercial advertisements breaking the news telecast abruptly at a point enrages the viewers compelling them to wait indefinitely. In fact, there is a lot for our news channels to learn from BBC or CNN with regard to the limited provision for commercials/ advertisements during the transmission of news channels. Otherwise, one day, as Mark Tully puts it, there might be a nationwide furore or protest from the viewers over this kind of news transmission.

Galore of Commercials – Traumatic Effect on Human Emotions – An Indefinite Test for Human Patience

A lavish praise is being showered on the Indian media for its 100 odd channels broadcasting with a massive advertising revenue touching Rs. 47 bn every year (Vanita Kohli, 2003: 60) but no effort is made to analyze as to who is paying for it and at what cost? Neither is any attempt made to measure the impact of these commercials on the psyche of various categories of viewers, i.e., men, women and children.

The cable operators too are reaping around Rs. 50 bn each year through their services to homes and advertising that comes from the local small scale commercial agencies. Anupama Vohra⁷ in her latest book, (based on original survey across some 600 odd households), *Impact of TV Ads on Consumers* had a different story to offer. But MR Dua⁸ didn't agree with most of her findings (Vidura: Jan-March 2006). According to her, the viewers were quite enthusiastic to participate in the schemes coming up through commercials in various programs for the youth and human welfare.

Such studies have hardly taken into account the very pertinent question that strikes any viewer any given moment while watching TV—*Whose TV it is?* And, entertainment at what cost and to whom? The incessant downpour of commercials compels the viewer either to turn up to another channel or switch off the TV. The viewers' are gradually realizing that TV sets are playing host to commercials and not for the entertainment for which they were invented in the first place.

⁷ Anupama Vohra has done her doctoral studies on *Advertising on TV* (published by S Wadhwa and Co, 2005).

⁸ Dr. M R Dua is Professor in Journalism.

As this psyche of the viewer became apparent in the research studies as pointed out by Kotler *et al.*, the ad-planning of majority of the channels worked out common time patterns for playing commercials so that they frustrate the viewers from 'zipping and zapping' (Philip Kotler and Kevin Lane Keller: 2006). True, such an approach has for quite sometime now been yielding the results as viewers are not opting for frequent change of channels. But, sure this strategy too may not last long and therefore warrants for a viewer-friendly ad-management policy and planning.

Enraging Frequency (f) of Commercials

Though the author discussed how Exposures (E) are scientifically planned for each advertisement from the point of view of corporate sector in the introductory part of this article, this study made an effort to gauze what would be the net effect of such commercials on the viewer's psyche?

Take a remote and put the TV set on search for 5 or 10 minutes. The channels keep changing for every 2 seconds in rapid succession. Note that in a given time of 5 or 10 minutes (as the experiment allows) one would stumble upon 90% channels one's TV receives would be telecasting advertisements or commercials. In other words, if one clicks the remote and open 10 channels in rapid succession, 9 channels would be showing commercials and in one channel one program or episode or a film being shown. On an average, every channel is going for commercials within a gap of 5-8 minutes during the telecast of a program.

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If the total commercials' time of all the channels is added up and divided by the number of channels, any given minute 9 out of 10 channels would end up in advertising. Alternatively, for every 5 minutes virtually every channel is putting up commercials. This is what is precisely happening with both the commercial channels and news channels.⁹ It is open for anyone to try the above methodology and arrive at mean of frequency of commercials, variance and standard deviation. There would not be a great difference in the ultimate data and the differences if any could be attributable to the time the experiments carried out and the number of channels chosen. (The theoretical and mathematical framework of methodology as to arriving at the 'F' narrated here would be reported elsewhere).

In no part of the world can one find such an amazing incessant array of commercials as it is in India which would lull the viewer to sleep or switch off the TV after a boring and dragging experience of watching a film or serial. The following patterns would suffice to reflect how the channels would take the viewer for a ride for an indefinite time.

Patterns of Commercials Applicable to Both Commercial Channels and News Channels

1. Repetition of ads for one's own (channels) whole range of serials including dialogs and title songs.
2. Ads of sponsors and co-sponsors (orally once—only voice without visuals).

⁹ This experiment has been repeated each time with 10, 20 and 30 channels at various intervals and programs including that of prime time and non-prime time, and the author has verified the data both in terms of 'reliability' and 'validity'. Validity can be achieved by any one by simple test-and re-test method as described above. Reliability is achieved statistically by drawing arithmetic mean (X), standard deviation and variance for each time for different attempts on the same day and on different days at different times. The coefficient of correlation is also determined for different trials.

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3. Ads of sponsors and co-sponsors (both audio-visually once).
4. Repetition of 2 and 3 again as part of ad-scheme or incentive to corporate sectors same time.
5. Repetition of 3 and 4 for every 3-5 minutes.
6. Signature songs of the channel for every half-an-hour of TV clock.

If one is watching a serial/episode of 30 minutes the breaks occur for ever 3-5 minutes (in the case of prime time) and 5-8 minutes in the case of non-prime time). As such one would be able to watch only 12-15 minutes of the episode; the rest 18-15 minutes would be continued to another day or week.

If this pattern of commercials or ad-planning is allowed to continue for long, one day the billion dollar ad-industry may crumble like house of cards, as it is nothing but dealing with human subjective feelings, besides giving the viewers that their free time is being taken for granted or for a ride.

Though a lot of sociological study can be done in a highly populous country like India, somehow there is no desired level of initiative at the behavioral schools in India. But the author's study raised a number of sociological questions with far-reaching implications on such 'ad-bursting' and 'continuity, concentration, flighting and pulsing'. After all, ad-planning involves social and legal obligations not only in terms of content, design and message generation but also in terms of influence they have on the psyche of the viewers. A few such consequences are listed here as hypotheses:

Socio-psychological effects of such indiscriminate advertising

1. Abrupt breaks, caused by the commercials in the continuity of the storyline of the serials/films, having no regard to the human emotions and their absorption into the story line, which an average Indian relates to one's personal life-situation at subconscious level, may have adverse socio-psychological impact on the audience.
2. Since the 'prime time' concept is based on the rate of viewing for which large scale commercials are slated, when the ratings go down, the time slots are abruptly shifted, which again subject the viewers to psychological disturbance as discussed above, due to lack of synchronization of timings caused by changing life and work styles. Such an abrupt shift may leave vacuum/void in the minds of the people and may lead to a feel of unfulfillment.
3. Sudden discontinuity of serials and sudden shift in the serials/episodes cause psychological jittery and inconvenience and people may feel uncomfortable in mind for sometime, though there is no evidence from medical experts to what extent such disturbance is impacting on their personal life and relationships. Indian sociologists and psychologists so far have focused on the ill-effects due to violence shown on small screen on the young and impressionable minds.
4. Due to sudden breaks caused by the ad-bursts or excessive commercials in the middle of dramatization/tragedy/comedy, the actual directional skills and characterization achieved to enthrall the audience may be lost. It is a great disgrace to the talent of filmmaking and film-makers too.

5. Repetition of old serials and sudden termination of serials without a logical end may throw the audience into quandary and in a way it is fraud on the audience.
6. Universally, people believe that there is a beginning, a middle portion and an ending to any story involving human emotions, sentiments, joys and sorrows. But the trend of the serials is that of garnering maximum commercials in the name of 'prime time', the serials are dragging on and on to indefinite number of episodes, meandering through illogical and unnatural twists and twirls, the viewers are lost as generations pass off in the serials with same heroes and heroines appearing as grandpas and grandmas with grandsons and granddaughters as heroes and heroines. It is nothing but ridiculing the very concept of story/theme involving humans and making sheer mockery of mankind.
7. Certain serials like *Saathia* (SAHARA) even went to the extent of criminalizing the domestic Indian life by resorting to plastic surgery for entire face only to acquire property. All this is being resorted to only to keep the serial going on and get the sponsors.

It is not possible for the TV channels to entertain the viewers throughout the day without meeting their own commercial needs

A Viewer-friendly Ad-planning Strategy – A Reasonable Minimum and Maximum/ Alternate Media

Admittedly, it is not possible for the TV channels to entertain the viewers throughout the day without meeting their own commercial needs. At the same time, the viewers' rights/legitimate aspirations to get the real entertainment for which they intended to buy a television should not be glossed over. The current trend of going for infinite number of commercials during the transmission of serials, both in the beginning, middle and end began by the state-run Doordarshan (DD) initially when it sponsored mega-serials like *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* (Vanita Kohli: 2003). It was again DD which set a new trend in crafting of stories that ran counter to the popular portrayal of stories (*Chandrakanta*). It was DD which began terminating the serials abruptly without a logical conclusion. The private channels soon picked up the cue and started multiplying the trend, with least regard for the viewers' interests and legitimate right to the entertainment.

As such, a *reasonable minimum and maximum* commercials should be worked out so that the viewers would not dread by sitting before TV sets. Alternatively, as Kotler *et al.*, pointed out alternate media such as Internet or Web advertising is the most gainful one and less costlier compared to the costs of '30-sec commercials' on prime channels during the 'prime time'.

Surprisingly, in the author's study it was found that foreign channels like ESPN, HBO, AXN, BBC, CNN, etc. were not found to going in for as many commercials as the Indianized channels were reeling out. Further, their pattern of showing commercials including their own sponsored programs are not time-consuming and repetitive. Yet, they are making huge profits when compared to what Indian media business industry could reap each year. In all aspects, their serials/episodes come close to the normal portrayal of story as conjured up by human beings always and do not drag indefinitely solely for the sake of commercials. Nor do they end up abruptly.

Box: Breakdown and Analysis of TV Channels

1. No. of National TV Networks: 8
2. Regional Networks: 11
3. State Networks: 8

Children's: 11

- Animax
- Boomerang
- Cartoon Network
- CBeebies
- Chutti TV, a children's channel in Tamil from Sun Network.
- Disney Channel India
- Hungama TV
- Nick
- Pogo
- Toon Disney/Jetix
- ViCTERS, an educational channel in Malayalam run by Department of Education, Kerala Government, in association of ISRO.


Documentaries: 5

- Nat Geo Adventure
- Animal Planet
- Discovery Channel
- National Geographic Channel
- The History Channel

Source: Wikipedia

Conclusion

In the whole craze of appreciating the increasing media business in billions through advertisements and commercials, every one is forgetting the interests of the viewers without whom all their business will crumble like a house of cards in a single day. Yet, no proper attention is paid to formulate a meaningful viewer-friendly ad-management policy so as to allow a *meaningful and healthy entertainment*. The emotional and intellectual interests of TV viewers, besides their free but limited leisure time should be taken into consideration for more friendly ad-policy.

In reality, in the scheme of whole media business, the TV viewer should have been the primary beneficiary. But, unfortunately, the whole idea turned upside-down. Not surprisingly, today the TV channels and cable operators are the primary beneficiaries. Corporate bodies (including the manufacturers of TV sets) are the secondary beneficiaries. The TV viewer was relegated to third place. Hence, the question comes whose TV is it? 

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